

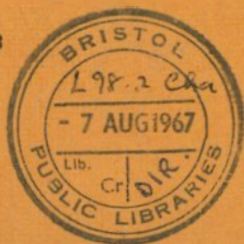
# THOMAS CHATTERTON

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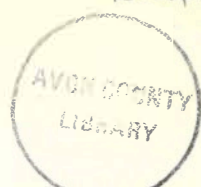


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## THOMAS CHATTERTON

by BASIL COTTLE



There is in London's Tate Gallery a melancholy ~~but~~ very popular painting by Henry Wallis, dated 1856 and entitled *The Death of Chatterton*: a grim garret bedroom, a heap of torn manuscripts, a misty view of St. Paul's Cathedral, a hopeful plant in flower on the sill, the gay colours of jacket and breeches, the pallor of a youth's body. The youth is Thomas Chatterton, born to poverty in Bristol in 1752, bred there in a harsh school and a dull apprenticeship, who yet against this unprivileged background began to write assured verse as a child, and went on to erect a whole medieval world of fantasy which he conveyed in his own imitation medieval English poetry, on scraps of genuine old parchment. The caprice of all this is perhaps childish; but for the performance of it there is no explanation save genius. In 1770, when he was only seventeen, his hopes crashed, and he took poison in London. Wallis painted in the very attic where the suicide occurred, and since no portrait of Chatterton was extant the figure was modelled by the poet and novelist George Meredith; even this had a gloomy ending—the artist eloped with the writer's wife two years later.

But a disservice has been done to the memory of Thomas Chatterton, English poet, by such pity and sensationalism; he has been summed up merely as 'the marvellous Boy', his faked medieval poems have been examined as a piece of linguistics and not as literature, and Wallis's painting has immortalized the pathos of the juvenile suicide in purple and puce. It is the purpose of this study to show Chatterton as England's youngest writer of sustained adult verse, but more vitally as her loudest herald of the Gothic Revival—that revival, late in the 18th century, of an interest in medieval buildings and writings.

His father was the master of the little school in Pile St., Bristol, for forty boys from Redcliffe and St. Thomas parishes, and was also a lay clerk in the Cathedral—a man proud, talented, musical, dissipated, toying with magic and owning 100 Roman coins and 150 books; the mother, half her husband's age when they married, was a nonentity from Stapleton. Three children made different kinds of gloomy entry into the world: Mary, out of wedlock; Giles Malpas, to die after four months; Thomas, posthumously, on 20 November 1752, in the north upper room of the little school-house, from which the widow had not yet been ousted. The cottage still stands, in the safe hands of the City Museum, and it is fronted

by the small pedimented façade of the school, brought back into line with the new thoroughfare slashed through the web of streets that Chatterton knew; across this road, the spire and north porch and bells of St. Mary Redcliffe church dominate the scene, though in his day the spire was truncated and the church much jostled.

Mrs. Chatterton eventually moved to Redcliffe Hill, and taught girls to sew, her dressmaker's patterns being sometimes cut from Redcliffe muniments that her husband had filched from the 'treasury' above the north porch; Mary seems to have been a simple girl, whose mind was occasionally deranged, and a grandmother completed the drab and meagre household. Thomas was a tearful and neurotic child, hiding in an attic and making no progress with learning; yet he and his playmates had a game in which he was their natural master, and his precocious vanity is seen in his request to a potter of his father's kin, who had promised a figured cup, to paint on it an angel with a trumpet 'to blow his name about'—a request not unlike Shelley's to the West Wind. The influence of St. Mary Redcliffe, where his uncle was sexton, was perhaps mainly unsettling too, since, like an anachronism in an age indifferent to Gothic buildings, he mooned inside with effigies for company, yet never gained more than a superficial knowledge of architecture or heraldry. He exclaims,

Thou seest this maystrie of a human hand,  
The pride of Brystowe and the Western land;

but the poem where he says so is of vague marvel rather than of understanding. The Pile St. School returned him to his mother as an incurable dullard, but suddenly—through the medium of Redcliffe parchments, his father's music folios, and a black-letter Bible—he caught the knack of reading and thence a relish for it, so that at seven he was ready to be nominated to Colston's School. He had already begun scribbling, and in the ten years left of his life he produced over 600 printed pages of poetry, as well as pamphlets and letters in prose; works, furthermore, in the framework of exacting and sustained themes and patterns.

Colston's (now superseded on its site by the Colston Hall, and clear of the city at Stapleton) stood suggestively where the White Friars had been; it occupied the Elizabethan Great House on St. Augustine's Back, there were still old arches from Carmelite times, and the boys were tonsured like little monks. But here the romance ended. The school served the mercantile interests of the city, and did so by the three Rs and the Church of England catechism, after seven years of which, a boy was bound apprentice to some trade or craft; the discipline was spartan, a boy was expelled in 1757

O Clayfield long renowned the Muses friend,  
Preserving in his goodness this I vouch;  
Unknown to you, Tranquillity, & Love,  
In this Address perhaps I am to blame,  
This rudeness let necessity excuse,  
And anxious Friendship for a Much-lov'd Muse.

Since have the Caeling Trees around the East  
Since Heaven found me, and all Powers condescend,  
Since every Number border'd to deplore,  
Since Fame asserted, Phillips was no more!

Day is so mansion'd in his native Sphere,  
Or is't a Vapor that exhales from fears?

Swift, as Idea, rid me of my pain,  
And let my dubious Methodness to plain

It is too true: The awful Lyre is strong,  
His Organ the Sister Muses sung;

O may he live and welcome to the strain!

My, generous Clayfield, rid me of my pain:  
Forgive my Boldness: think, the urgent Cause,  
And who can bind Necessity with Laws?

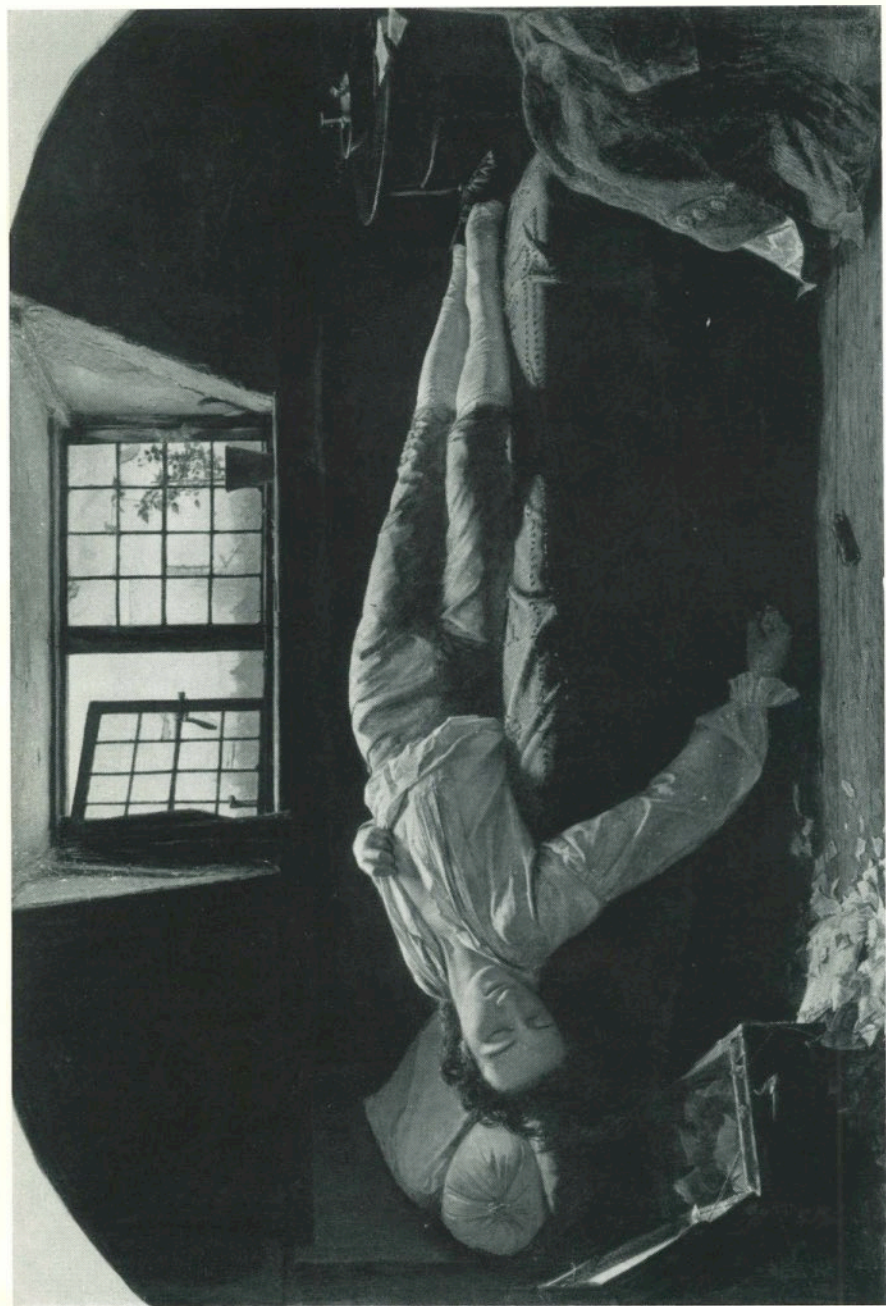
I wait, the Admirer of your noble parts

You, friend to Genius, Science & Arts -

Thomas Chatterton

Monday W. Oct. 30. 69

Yours



H. Wallis, *The Death of Chatterton* (London, Tate Gallery). Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Tate Gallery, London.

‘for a leprosy’, and there were no humane studies whatever. Yet Chatterton held his own, and was of course no financial burden on his mother; one usher at least was enlightened and kindly, and some of the boys were agreeable friends. And by voracious reading he equipped himself more precisely for one side of his poetical career, that of social commentator and satirist; the other came more wonderfully.

When he was ten, he was confirmed by Bishop Newton of Bristol, and began to use his pocket-money to borrow from a circulating library. These happenings are reflected in his first known poem, *On the Last Epiphany*, published in *Felix Farley’s Journal* and naturally contributing nothing to eschatology, yet a correct and neat little piece; the wording is studied and Miltonic, though the ‘8-and-8’ (with a longer line to round off) makes it sound like a common type of hymn. There is as yet no imagery or vision, but there is one warning of the idiom he would soon be faking—the use of one ‘olde’ -*eth* inflexion amid the contemporary grammar. The next surviving poem, from when he was perhaps eleven, was signed ‘X. Y.’, the first of several pseudonyms; it is *A Hymn for Christmas Day*, and the stanzas are positively clever, since they are shaped by antithesis and they glitter with single lines of paradox such as ‘The God Eternal died’. They also show a violation of grammatical concord by ‘attraction’ (of the verb to the number of the nearest noun) that remained a favourite trick or error with him—‘The texture of our souls were made’.

It has been as well to linger over these utter juvenilia, because in 1763 he became his odd self, to the detriment of his innocent scholarship, in a satire on the churchwarden who had just had the Redcliffe churchyard cross destroyed; there are many wasted words and derived ideas, the fun is desultory, and the gusto is forced, but in it a child of eleven presses forward to the van of the Gothic return, as early as Bishop Percy and Macpherson and Horace Walpole. The scraps of Middle English, Latin, and Norman French, that he was picking up, the curious items from antiquarians such as Weever and Verstegan, and any of his mother’s Redcliffe parchments that carried writing, were already being lumped into a strange amalgam along with genius and mischief; and he suddenly showed a Colston’s usher the ‘pastoral eclogue’ *Elinoure and Juga*. Its parchment was ancient, its writing yellowed and strange, its rhyme-scheme that of the Chaucerian *rime royal*, and its spelling bizarre enough to deceive an age somewhat unmindful of pre-Miltonic English; Chatterton passed it off as of the 15th century, and no-one noticed the charnel-house sentiments from such poems as Gray’s

*Elegy*, or the alexandrines from Spenser. But it would be uncharitable and uncritical to see the genesis of the poet's art in the success of a deception; a boy not yet in his teens had admittedly scored over scholars and antiquarians and fellow-pupils by an elaborate prank, but the spirit of this new work was the best and essential part of him, and it developed into his real poetic current. His double life began, and from now on his poetry has two languages, the acknowledged and the anonymous.

We may assume that he was conscious of poverty, though there was promise of material prosperity if he worked hard; he knew isolation, though he early belonged to a circle with like interests; the materialism of Bristol hurt him, though his swashbuckling descent on London was to suggest that he could reckon with the hard world if it paid him enough. The dream that he erected reads like a consolation for present trials, and the troubled boy slipped back to his own inaccurate version of the 15th century and luxuriated there. It proved a temporary palliative, and in his last London days the dream faded, taking all hope with it; but while it lasted he identified himself with Thomas Rowley, priest, secretary to the enlightened magnate William Canynges, with Our Lady on the Red Cliff as his background and with the interesting duty of collecting antiquities for his patron. The name, at least, of Thomas Rowley was authentic; it is on a civilian's brass in St. John's, Bristol, where it was perilously easy for any sceptic to find it and undermine the whole elaborate story. But the rest was a charming allegory of Chatterton's own longing and his few little enjoyments; Canynges's coterie addressed verses to one another, acted in Rowley's plays, held political views, and were in various ways like any group of young Georgian scribblers, but above all there was a patron—and *that* Chatterton never found.

On 1 July 1767, not yet fifteen but with some of his Rowleiana already written, he was apprenticed to a Bristol attorney, John Lambert, possibly at his office in 37 Corn St., whither he had moved perhaps before Chatterton's arrival. The job was extraordinary in its mixture of privilege and hardship; the boy was tied to the office by himself for twelve hours a day, eating at Lambert's house with the menials in the kitchen and sleeping there with the house-boy, with two hours off in the evening and some freedom on Sunday; on the other hand, he had hardly any work to do beyond the copying of legal precedents. This life, and the quiet solitude, which could so easily have induced a morbid idleness, were put to creative purpose; and even his official leisure passed decorously—at home in the evenings, exploring the country-

side on Sundays. Above all, his thwarted pride now needed the consummation of the Rowley myth, which took shape and blossomed in the dull office.

The English in which it was expressed became no more rational, and it could be argued from this alone that a deception so recklessly planned was not his main intention at all, that he was rather creating his own individual language for poetry. True, he obstinately went on disclaiming Rowley's verses, as if faithful to a childish secret; but it is clear that he eventually wrote in Rowleian almost direct, not by translating it from the idiom of his own day, and risked detection by this frankness. It must be stated at once that the language is bogus, and distressingly so to a pedant: the calligraphy has modern capitalization and no medieval contractions; in metrics it imitates writers as late as Pope; his rhymes are often not valid for the 15th century (*go/trow*), or made to work by mis-spelling (*note* for *night*) or bad grammar or coinings; his syllables are counted in the modern way (*inspiration* would have had five, not four), and his monotonous final *-e* is decorative, not a grammatical inflexion; constructions like 'so haveth I' are flatly ignorant. Similarly, Rowley's diction can easily be exposed: one old glossary included the verb *houten* meaning 'halloo, hallow', another respelt the gloss as 'hollow', another misinterpreted this, and Rowley used it as an adjective. He copied Anglo-Saxon words from Somner's 1659 dictionary, but only as far as *ahrrered*, and used ten of them (all beginning with *a*!) in a work which he dared to send to Horace Walpole. And Rowley was better read in the works of his successors than in those of his contemporaries and predecessors: *The Faerie Queene*, *Hamlet*, Nicholas Rowe, Gray, Pope, were pressed into service more than Chaucer, at whom, it seems, Rowley had merely glanced.

Here, it would seem, was a mouldy method of writing poetry. Yet because Chatterton could not be himself in the philistinism of a mercantile city, he became himself in this odd guise, a Romantic behind a battered casement of stained glass. His contemporary 'railing' poems have their young genius, too, but it is as Rowley that he is a pioneer in bold expression and in metre; here he writes with splendour and great human understanding, catching at the same time the spirit of the medieval age. Bristol made many contributions to the Gothic Revival—the tower and grotto at Goldney House, the 'castle' and bath-house at Arno's Vale, the battlemented shot-tower, Blaise Castle on its hill, the ununderstood 'Gothick' of St. Nicholas, St. Michael and St. Paul; but Chatterton's is the clearest and most authentic statement, and old Bristol is its

inspiration. Rowley's set are in communication with John Lydgate, the real monk-poet of Bury St. Edmunds, but the best poems are set in Bristol. In the *Bristowe Tragedie* Syr Charles Bawdin, condemned to execution for supporting the Lancastrian cause in the Wars of the Roses, is, after a cool and defiant speech, dragged on his sled through the city streets to execution, accompanied by the non-existent *friars* of St. Augustine's in *monkish* russet, the corporation, numerous minstrels who 'tun'd the strunge bataunt' (whatever *that* was), and other bursts of colour and sentiment. So to the High Cross (where Chatterton once fancied a St. Andrew's church on the Dutch House site); the Yorkist Edward IV sits 'Att the grete mynsterr wyndowe' to see him go by, and suffers a fine outburst of his vituperation before the sled is out of earshot. The poem is in ballad metre; *Chevy Chase* was certainly a favourite with Rowley, and its spirit—slowed down and circumstantial now—lives on here.

The two little poems *Onn Oure Ladies Chyrche* rub their eyes with wonder, infecting us with belief in the epithet 'fetive' and involving also the 'chapelle brighte' built by Canynges in Westbury-on-Trym ('the Towne,/ Where glassie bubblynge Trymme doth roun'). They are perhaps in deliberate contrast—one handsome in its opulent Spenserian stanzas, the other dreamy and tinkling in its short couplets.

Chatterton reached his heights in the play *Ælla: a Tragycal Enterlude*. He treats it very importantly, prefacing it with the statement that it was acted before the Duke of Norfolk in Canynges's Red House (later 97 Redcliff St., a mansion disgracefully destroyed in the 1930s); then an Epistle, then a Letter, than an Introduction. It was all commissioned by Canynges, from his Freemasons' Lodge, to mark the laying of the foundation-stone of the rebuilt St. Mary Redcliffe, and its action is set in that almost unknown city, Anglo-Saxon Bristol. We are to believe that Bristol was the core of resistance to the Danes, and Ælla, 'warde' of the castle, is hurried from his wedding night by their irruption on to the Somerset coast. His victory near Watchet gives him a fearful wound, so that he longs only to die in the sight of his Birtha; but she meanwhile is being abducted by his disguised henchman Celmonde, who has almost accomplished his dark design when some chivalrous Danes spring out from ambush, kill him, and return her to Bristol. It is too late; Ælla, mistaking the motive of her departure, has fatally stabbed himself, and she faints on his corpse. The little plot has its oddities—the heroine does not die of grief, the hero was perhaps mortally wounded before his Tragic

Flaw upset him, the nation's enemies can behave very decently, and even the lustful villain dies bravely and repentant; but in the compass of merely 1,250 lines there is an organic development of character, an 'atmosphere' perversely sketched by 150 lines of cheerful minstrelsy, and many different narrative and metrical resources. The mournful lyric with the refrain

Mie love ys dedde,  
Gone to hys death-bedde,  
Al under the wyllowe tree,

whatever its debt to Shakespeare, is deservedly famous, and one line is especially subtle in its alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme: 'Come, wythe acorne-coppe and thorne'. The minstrelsy treats the joys of love and 'Whatte pleasure ytt ys to be married!'; it is here that the fifteen-year-old poet makes the statement, so extraordinary for the 18th century,

Wommen bee made, notte for hemselfes, botte manne,  
Bone of hys bone, and chyld of hys desire.

And Ælla's high speech to his troops, with its confidence that none will ever say that Bristol slept while foemen were in the land, rolls for 100 lines from its majestic opening:

Now havynge done oure mattynes & oure vowes,  
Lette us for the intended fyghte be boune.

These astonishing poems, and the rest of the Rowley cycle, are certainly Chatterton's own work; but the motive, poetic creation, was soon coloured by the tempting chance of slight gain. He discovered that three Bristol gentlemen would welcome Rowley's effusions—Barrett, the cold surgeon and historian, who tried to make him drink, and used to argue with him for the pleasure of seeing his eyes strike fire; Catcott the pewterer, who once spat in a customer's eye because he 'had a propensity'; and Burgum, Catcott's partner, who did considerable services to music in the city. Each of these men at times performed actions that were mean and vain and foolish, yet each had the antiquities of Bristol at heart; and though Burgum's payment to Chatterton of 5/- for the 'de Bergham' pedigree was poor wages for a poor imposture, the three have perhaps been too often regarded as the evil geniuses of the boy's life. There were other bad influences, too; the male members of the 'Juvenile Society', who met in a hired tavern room to read ranting plays, and wrote squibs on one another, sound harmless enough and even promising, but so many names of authentic Bristol girls run through his correspondence and his unpublishable *curiosa* that he appears to have become recklessly promiscuous before his apprenticeship ended. We hear less, too,

of the antiquities and scenery that lie so abundantly around Bristol; the theatre was now a greater source of inspiration—unless in this he was following Charles Churchill. He came to write unappreciatively of the grandeur outside his mutinous life, and on the heights of Clifton there was surely no need to say

Eager at length, I strain each aching limb  
And breathless now the mountain's summit climb.

Worst of all, Rowley had died. *Felix Farley* and the London papers wanted up-to-the-minute lampoons and social comment, and the acknowledged verses were soon his paramount concern. This should not, strictly, be regretted; the Rowley game could not last for ever, and the creature must be left behind when the creator grew to manhood. But, in the event, the best of Chatterton perished with Rowley, and in what remains of his life there is almost more threat than promise; he had already recaptured marvellously the sounds and colours of a very different age, and made a revolutionary rediscovery of 'equivalent substitution' of feet in his four-stress lines, a revival commonly dated from Coleridge's *Christabel* at the end of the century. Even if the means to these achievements were a puerile forgery, there was a poet at work behind it; but from now on his unfailing, easy ear for rhythm had as its main object the vignettes and pamphlets of a fickle public, and his own testy personal outbursts.

The corpus of his acknowledged works is, however, impressive and full of interest. It had begun, of course, with two religious poems. He soon became religion's foe; scepticism, Wilkesism, and philandering, became his set attitude, but a late and hymn-like poem seems to show a return, and closes on a note of Christian hope:

The gloomy mantle of the night,  
Which on my sinking spirit steals,  
Will vanish at the morning light  
Which God, my East, my Sun, reveals.

Even the verses written on the day before his suicide beg for Heaven's mercy and bid his mother farewell, but these sentiments are mingled with his hatred of

Bristol's dingy piles of brick,  
Lovers of mammon, worshippers of trick,  
and its 'guzzling aldermanic fools'.

The elegiac verses are perhaps his feeblest. That on the Colston's usher, Thomas Phillips, is no doubt sincerely meant, but its truths relate most closely to Chatterton himself:

Few are the pleasures Chatterton e'er knew,  
Short were the moments of his transient peace.

He laboured at this poem, and the changes in the second draft from 'cheerful' to 'frugal' and from 'friendship's potent spells' to 'necromantic spells' may cause us misgivings. Further, he so praises Phillips's forgotten Muse that we wonder how accurate is the rest of his praise. The despair is in clichés ('Farewell the laurel! Now I grasp the yew!') and fresh phrases that sound stale ('deathly tomb' and 'pitchy vapour'); the stanza is from Gray's *Elegy*, and the pathetic fallacy is everywhere: 'Wet with the dew the yellow hawthorns bow'. There are other elegies to Bristolians, with a final frigid one to Lord Mayor William Beckford of London, who had seemed likely to become the poet's patron, and the fulsome note runs through them all. Even a suicide, that may have confirmed Chatterton in his own intention, is given the shocking line 'The blood-stained tomb where Smith and comfort lie'. In addition, he parodied the elegiac mode: *February* pretends to express itself in terms of the Zodiac, but with a sudden irreverent twist of realism in 'And the spruce mercer trembles in his shop'; another poem is insincerely Gothic, with adders, meteors, levined oaks, snowy peaks, a 'shrieking lay', and the final bathos 'lady Betty's tabby cat is dead'. But the humourless elegies are careful, schoolboy stuff; *Clifton*, though it takes up a little the challenge of suggestive scenery, and mentions the Hotwell, the Gorge, Brandon Hill, and the theatre at Jacob's Well, is reminded of the death of Powell the actor, and so of death generally, thence of the Cathedral, dirges, and 'my lone abode'.

The amatory poems and letters will please us little more. He cannot be blamed for the cacophonous names of the girls in Redcliffe (Maria Rumsey, Sally Clarke, Sukey Webb, Polly Lutley, Eleanor Hoyland, the Misses Grimes and Porter), and some of the verses were written for other boys, but the sentiments are artificial and eventually sinister. Small wonder that the juvenile who began a poem of advice 'Marriage, dear Mason, is a serious thing' will give us little satisfaction on the subject of love; he made his task harder by using acrostics and by calling on the whole Pantheon of the gods; and Sally Clarke's harpsichording would have soothed King Saul. But Rowley's creator was now using a porch of St. Mary Redcliffe for his amours with the girls to whom some of the uglier trifles were addressed.

The three *African Eclogues* contain some of his best contemporary verse, and nobly uphold the cause of the slaves; he shares here the rising interest of his time in foreign parts, especially the

tropics, and the landscapes are hectic and exciting. There are still conventional phrases—a tiger skin is ‘the furry spoil’; but the situations are clearly conceived. The hero ‘gained a mountain glaring with the dawn’, and, deprived of his beloved by the white men, cries ‘O could I throw my javelin from my eyes!’. Chatterton may well be writing with feeling and vision here, and it is suggestive of his adaptable genius to turn to his one financial success, the burletta *The Revenge*, for which he got five guineas. This idle, naughty piece goes with a swing and treats the amours of Jupiter, but its pretty songs are rather of Merrie England than of the Classics; ‘Away to the woodlands, away!’, and the wanton catalogue of swains called *The Virgin’s Choice*, sound detached enough, but they were the work of a youth who would kill himself within three months in a Holborn garret.

All these miscellaneous modern poems yield in bulk, and usually in merit, to what he now considered his calling, satire. We have seen that he had struck the vein early, when the Redcliffe cross was felled; not long after this, he satirized *Apostate Will* for becoming a Methodist and then recanting. Eventually, with the pardonable cross-grained perkiness of youth, he was prepared to flay any individual and any cause. Had he reflected, his pride might have been diminished at the thought that he was throwing himself away as a hack for a number of indifferent periodicals, especially when London engulfed him; and now and then the poet in him repented, and a few flowers grew in the mud. For instance, *The Exhibition*, written in London on 1-3 May 1770, is just filthy in its onslaught on certain Bristol notables, but is there not nostalgia in this little picture?—

Flying on silken wings of dusty Grey,  
The cooling evening clos’d a sultry day.  
The Cit walk’d out to Arno’s dusty Vale  
To take a smack of Politicks and Ale,  
Whilst rock’d in clumsy Coach about the Town  
The prudent Mayor jogg’d his Dinner down.

The long and ornate *Kew Gardens*, so full of names in asterisks that it is quite unintelligible, is the showpiece of his satirical skill, with its pretended wrath, its ephemeral politics, its wasted oratory, and its poor jokes. Yet here, and throughout the satires, there are flashes of phrase, and consolidations of idea, that impress and even delight: a fat man called ‘an animated hill of oil’, an outraged dowager who ‘dined upon her nails’, ‘the drilling rain’, the ‘swimming elegance’ of a preacher, sermons as ‘flimsy wires from reason’s ingot drawn’; a frontal attack on Bute, North, and

the other boobies who alienated America; his belief in a God working ceaselessly through natural laws; his self-knowledge (which was considerable), and its witty link with Macpherson's faked poems of Ossian—'Alas! I was not born beyond the Tweed!'; good influences from Dryden, over-riding influences from Churchill, and even echoes from Pope:

Here conversation takes a nobler flight,

For Nature leads the theme, and all is right.

However breathless is the more presumptuous satire, the moments of gravity rise far beyond the poet's seventeen years and the political climate of 1770:

Alas! America, thy ruined cause

Displays the ministry's contempt of laws.

Unrepresented thou art taxed, excised,

By creatures much too vile to be despised;

The outcast of an outed gang are sent

To bless thy commerce with a government.

Whilst pity rises to behold thy fate,

We saw thee in this worst of troubles great.

The last, hurtling days of his life do not belong to Bristol. His eagerness for a career, and his impatience with his drudgery, had forced on him some desperate and foolish measures. Dodsley the publisher was sent the bait of some Rowley, but did not rise to it; Horace Walpole was blandly pleased—indeed, his courtesy warms us—but his investigations into his correspondent, and the flat judgment of Gray and Mason against the poems as genuine, excusably hardened him. Chatterton drew up some savage lines to send him, 'but my Sister persuaded me out of it'; the poem exploits the contrast of luxurious wordling and penniless boy, and brightly accuses Walpole of writing 'Prosy Chapters' and 'twaddling Letters to some Fair', but it is cleverest in its defence of Rowley. 'Who wrote Otranto?' it asks with vicious pertinence; and the last lines are almost a confession of authorship—

But I shall live & Stand

By Rowley's side—when *Thou* art dead & damned.

Posterity may feel that he should have sent it.

But the irksome constriction that he felt in Bristol, his dowdy family whom he promised to enrich, the free thought and the slackening morals, were all preparing him for flight. The first necessity was to slip out of his indentures. A suicide threat, left on his desk at Lambert's, alarmed his master and drew a kindly sermon from Barrett, whereat he wept and afterwards wrote Barrett

a letter blaming 'my PRIDE, my damn'd, native, unconquerable Pride'. Soon after, however, on 14 April 1770, an enormous *Last Will and Testament* turned up in the same place, written 'in the utmost Distress of Mind' but certainly imitated from a mock will in *Town and Country*; the next day was Easter Sunday, and he proposed to take his own life on 'the feast of the resurrection'. There are verses for Burgum, Catcott, and Barrett—only the last being let off lightly; he hopes the Coroner will 'bring it in Lunacy', and then he wants to be buried 'in the Tomb of my Fathers', with a monument 4' 5" high and six tablets: one in French to Gualeroine Chatterton (†1260), and one in Latin to Alanus Chatterton (†1415) and Alicia his wife—these two slabs to be 'engraven in old English Characters'; one to his father, and one to himself, both in Roman lettering; and two non-existent coats of arms. The testament itself is all an impudent and malicious bestowal of qualities on Bristolians in need of them, save that his two womenfolk are left 'to the protection of my Friends if I have any'. A codicil requests that the will be printed in *Felix Farley*; but it did not have to reach so far to be effective, and Lambert released him at once.

Thus in April 1770 he sold his masterpiece, *Ælla*, to Catcott, was given a collection by his friends, distributed some gingerbread on St. Mary Redcliffe steps, and hastened off to London from 'Bristol's narrow streets / Where pride and luxury with meanness meets'. His letters home are buoyant from the start, and *Kew Gardens*, which tilts at Dr. Johnson's play *Irene*, is equally emphatic about Bristol:

Lost to all learning, elegance, and sense,  
 Long had the famous city told her pence;  
 Avarice sat brooding in her white-washed cell,  
 And pleasure had a hut at Jacob's Well . . .  
 A mean assembly-room, absurdly built,  
 Boasted one gorgeous lamp of copper gilt;  
 With farthing candles, chandeliers of tin,  
 And services of water, rum, and gin.  
 There, in the dull solemnity of wigs,  
 The dancing bears of commerce murder jigs.  
 Here dance the dowdy belles of crooked trunk,  
 And often, very often, reel home drunk.

His mother is told of the superiority of London, the guineas promised by various magazines, the patronage of Wilkes, the influential people who show him favour, the Chapter Coffee House and its 'geniuses', his Shoreditch lodgings 'in one of Mr.

Walmsley's best rooms', and the 'trifling presents' he has bought for his family. Only the last of these triumphs is strictly accurate, and the room was shared with another boy; but the brave pretence continued, flowering into fantasies like his being suggested as companion to the young Duke of Northumberland on the Grand Tour. 'Bravo, hey boys, up we go!'—and nothing is wrong at all. But in June 1770 he moved from the Shoreditch house, where he had a relative to keep an eye on him, to the house of Mrs. Angel, who made 'sacques' (women's loose coats and gowns) in Brooke St., Holborn; the area was a slum, and his room an attic. The unfortunate poet, Richard Savage, born in Holborn, had died in Bristol Newgate; and Chatterton was aware of this example-in-reverse. He went on writing with all the old fury—lampoons, personal letters on architecture and music, burlettas, even another *African Eclogue*—but his notebook, and other evidence and conjecture, suggest that he was receiving almost nothing for his productions, except for the decent fee that he earned with *The Revenge*.

Only one old Bristol friend came to comfort him in his adversity—Rowley, bringing with him that most moving of all his poems, *An Excelente Balade of Charitie*; here Chatterton, with a frank dependence on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, surely sees himself in the character of the stricken man:

Look in his glommed face, his sprighte there scanne;  
Howe woe-be-gone, how withered, forwynd, deade!

The music is as rich as ever, and what material is derived is made his own; but *Town and Country* would not print it. Off to his family went his box of promised presents—china, dress-patterns, snuff-box, fans, tobacco; a picaresque story, *The Memoirs of a Sad Dog*, was formed hastily and competently; a last letter to his sister, on 20 July, is a brief jotting about an intended oratorio, a promise to visit them during the year, the next *Town and Country* filled by him, his company 'courted everywhere', and of course 'the ladies'. But the death of Lord Mayor Beckford was a real blow to his hopes, however callously he may have reckoned that he was 'glad he is dead by' £3 13s. 6d. gained on elegies and essays; and the discrediting of his chosen political party involved him in its toils. That he was suffering also from venereal disease, an assertion made by several after his death, is not proven and, in view of his other misfortunes and the horrors of his combined adolescence and genius, is certainly not needed to explain the final catastrophe.

After some days apparently without food, though Mrs. Angel offered him a dinner, he took arsenic in water, possibly after opium to deaden the pain, and died on the night of 24-25 August 1770. His body was buried in a common pit in the burial ground of Shoe Lane workhouse; there is an impossible legend of its secret reinterment at St. Mary Redcliffe. He was aged only 17 years and 277 days.

The amazing monument of his fame was erected in two stages. First came the protracted and learned controversy over the authorship of the Rowley poems, when scholarship was divided into two camps, with Dean Milles of Exeter leading the utterly mistaken Rowleians. The campaign at least led to editions of the antiquated poems, especially Tyrwhitt's sensible volume of 1777. In 1803, Longman published both sides of the poetry, as complete as it could be made, edited by Robert Southey and Joseph Cottle; this was done entirely for the benefit of Chatterton's sister, now widowed and left with one of her four children. A note in Cottle's writing mentions a profit of £504 to come to her, and she certainly left £300; her spinster daughter, Marianne, died at the house of Mr. Bampfylde, a cooper, in West St., on 7 September 1807, and was the last of the melancholy family.

But far more important was his sudden renown among poets. The feeling that he had died for poetry inspired a number of famous writers in their youth. Coleridge, when only sixteen, wrote a *Monody* on him; Wordsworth in *Resolution and Independence* called him 'the marvellous Boy, / The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride'; Shelley devoted a harrowing stanza to him in *Adonais*; Keats 'with a bowed mind' dedicated *Endymion* to him as 'the most English of Poets except Shakespeare', and was much influenced by him. And, though Hazlitt and Carlyle were censorious, poets as various as Crabbe, Scott, Byron, and Rossetti, were loud in his praise, along with a host of poetasters that included Ann Yearsley the Bristol milkwoman. In France, the rising Romantics acknowledged his example: Alfred de Vigny's *Chatterton* is a prose play by a poet, with the bald thesis of a spiritual man stifled by a materialist society, and with an absurd plot. Vigny invents a family called Bell, with whom the pure-souled youth lives in London (Mrs. Kitty Bell falling in love with him), a Quaker to advise him, a set of English lords full of *rosbif*, and a complete meet coming into his digs. It was this play that Ruggiero Leoncavallo used for his opera *Chatterton*; but, unlike his *Pagliacci*, it was a failure.

have had from me assuring them that they need be under no  
Apprehensions from the Appearance of my Ghost for I say  
for none of them

Now I leave all my Debts in the whole not five Pounds  
to the Payment of the <sup>5</sup>Charitable and generous Chamber  
of Bristol On Penalty if <sup>5</sup>assured to hinder every Member  
from our eating a good Dinner by appearing in the form  
of a Bailiff - If in defiance of this terrible Specter they  
obstinately persist in refusing to discharge my Debts let  
my two Creditors apply to the Supporters of the Bill of Rights  
Now I leave my Mother & Sister to the protection of  
my Friends if I have any

Executed in the presence of Omnisuonia  
this 14<sup>th</sup> Day of April 1770

J: Chatterton



The Chatterton Memorial in St. Mary Redcliffe Churchyard; to its left, the façade of the Pile Street School. re-set against Chatterton's birthplace.

*Photographed by Reece Winstone.*

The poet's name survives in Redcliffe as the name of a square and of a block of council flats. The plan for a monument was started in 1792, met protests from Rowleians and moralists, and was crowned in 1840 by a tall stone Gothic pentagon with a puppet-statue of a bluecoat boy holding 'Ella' on a scroll; even this left Redcliffe churchyard for the crypt in 1846, but since 1857 it has stood on unconsecrated ground facing the birthplace. To many, it will seem that the greatest memorial has been Meyerstein's 600-page *Life*, that tender and compelling masterpiece of an unregarded scholar and poet.

### Bibliography

E. H. W. Meyerstein, *A Life of Thomas Chatterton* (1930) is essential for any study of the poet; it is exhaustive both as biography and criticism.

The *Works* can be studied in the editions of R. Southey and J. Cottle (1803) or, more handily, W. W. Skeat (1871), Sidney Lee (1906), and H. D. Roberts (1906).

The tedious smut of *The Exhibition* is only in Esther P. Ellinger, *Thomas Chatterton* (1930).

The University of Washington, Seattle, is to bring out a definitive edition of the *Works*, edited by B. Hoover and D. Taylor.

Bibliographies exist in F. A. Hyett and W. Bazeley, *Chattertoniana* (1914) and E. R. Norris Matthews, *Thomas Chatterton, a Bibliography* (1916). A full list of the many manuscript sources is in Meyerstein, pages 547-550.



